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KGB/CIA

AS ONE READS the entirely predictable Soviet-bloc reactions to the Rockefeller commission report published on this page today, it becomes evident that a bit of perspective is required. First, it needs to be said that the opportunity for hypocritical gloating and hostile propaganda given Moscow is a small price to pay for the public cleansing of the CIA that is now going on in Washington. Fortunately, Americans have not held back from the exercise out of the misguided notion that it is not worth the embarrassment, as welcome and useful to the Soviet KGB as that embarrassment unquestionably is. A society like ours, which rests on the knowing consent of the governed, has no other acceptable way to remedy the flaws that afflicted the CIA's performance by virtue of its abuse of secret power.

So, the United States has to be prepared to take its lumps. To read these "Other Voices" literally, however, one would think that the Soviet Union had never engaged in secret intelligence operations abroad or, for that matter, in police repressions at home. In fact, the Russians have never stopped engaging in both. The kinds of CIA activities now being uncovered in the United States are the normal fare of the KGB, an organization which, needless to say, does not have to fear that other elements of Soviet society or government will unmask it in public. Pravda is not likely to report, for instance, that KGB

subsidies sustain the strikes which are one of the minority Communist Party's principal anti-democratic tactics in Portugal today. Do not hold your breath waiting for a Politburo member to deplore the continuing surveillance of millions of Soviet citizens by the KGB.

The disclosure of CIA misdeeds tempts some properly outraged Americans to conclude that there is no real difference between the CIA and KGB, or between their respective societies. This is a critical point. Certainly both organizations have regarded themselves, at least in their foreign operations, as professional and patriotic. Whether one or the other has been more adventuresome or more effective abroad is, on the basis of the known facts, hard to say. In respect to domestic activities, however, no meaningful comparison can be made. The CIA and FBI function in a free society. There is a limit to how far they can stray. And they can be called to account; that is, in fact, what we are now witnessing. But the KGB represents the fundamental method of government in a country like the Soviet Union: there is hardly any limit short of outright Stalinist terror on what it can do, and there is no way to call it to account. We Americans sometimes lash ourselves rhetorically by declaring that there is no difference between ourselves and the Russians. But the preservation of that difference is actually the essential and welcome purpose of the current inquiry into the CIA.